

Climacus' Two Ways of Reflection

Hans Halvorson

May 16, 2025

Motivation and Setup

Overview

- What kind of work is *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*?
- Climacus' picture of "two ways of reflection"
- Relevance to scientific objectivity and rational inquiry

The Postscript as Epistemological Intervention

- Not traditional metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics
- Aimed to dislodge the Hegelian mindset
- Epistemic self-understanding as central concern

Climacus

“Let the speculative philosopher be sparing neither of time nor of diligence; they are none the less not interested infinitely, personally and passionately, nor could they wish to be. On the contrary, they will seek to cultivate an attitude of objectivity and disinterestedness.” (pp. 23–24)

The Two Ways

Climacus' Distinction

Two Ways of Reflection

“Two ways, in general, are open for an existing individual: either he can do his utmost to forget that he is an existing individual, or he can concentrate his entire energy upon the fact that he is an existing individual.” (p. 109)

- Objective way: abstract, detached, impersonal
- Subjective way: passionate, situated, decisive

Misreading Kierkegaard

- Robert Adams: defines objective reasoning as what most fair-minded people would accept
- But this misrepresents Kierkegaard's concern
- K. critiques a false ideal of impersonal, godlike epistemic position

Adams (1977)

"Let us say that a piece of reasoning is 'objective' just in case..."

The Objective Way

Features of the Objective Way

- Characterized by disinterested inquiry and abstraction
- Seeks (timeless), impersonal truth
- Tends to erase the finite knower

Climacus

“From an objective standpoint, Christianity is a *res in facto posita*, whose truth it is proposed to investigate in a purely objective manner.” (p. 29)

Objectivity as Detachment

Climacus

“...they are still not infinitely, personally, impassionedly interested. On the contrary, they would even rather not be so. Their observations are to be objective, disinterested.”

(Hannay, p. 20)

- Climacus praises disinterestedness as an ideal of scholarly detachment
- Real inquiry demands existential investment

Objectivity at the Limit

Climacus

“At its maximum this [objective] way will lead to the contradiction that only the objective has come into being, while the subjective has gone out.” (p. 173)

- The illusion of pure objectivity becomes comic
- Objective ideal ignores that the inquirer is changing while inquiring

The Subjective Way

The Subjective Turn

- K. recommends the subjective way—but not as fideism
- Subjective way demands passionate commitment and decision
- Objective inquiry can inform, but not replace, decision

Climacus

“The existing individual who chooses the subjective way apprehends instantly the entire dialectical difficulty...” (p. 178)

Subjectivity and Risk

- To exist is to be becoming—so subjectivity is inescapable
- Objective ideal fails to accommodate the risk of existence

Climacus

“Since man is a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal, the happiness that the speculative philosopher may enjoy will be an illusion...” (p. 54)

Complementarity and Conflict

False Dilemma?

- Why not combine objectivity and subjectivity?
- Climacus says they are complementary, not additive

Climacus

“The more objective the contemplative inquirer, the less he bases an eternal happiness... since there can be no question of an eternal happiness except for the passionately and infinitely interested subject.” (p. 33)

Complementarity as Epistemological Structure

- K.'s model: knower must be in a definite mode to know
- Objective indifference may block access to existential truths

Climacus

“In the case of a kind of observation where it is requisite that the observer should be in a specific condition, it naturally follows that if he is not in this condition, he will observe nothing.” (p. 51)

Implications

Impact on Philosophy of Science

- Objectivity is a noble ideal, but must be humanized
- Inquiry is always agent-relative
- Bohr and van Fraassen take this lesson seriously

Bohr

“The epistemological lesson of quantum physics is that the observer must choose between complementary modes of description.”

Beyond Hegel and Quine

- Hegel: the inner is the outer, subject-object collapse
- Quine: first-person discourse eliminable in favor of third-person
- Kierkegaard resists both: insists on irreducibility of subjective mode

Conclusion

Final Reflections

- Climacus' "two ways" model is existential, not metaphysical
- The critique is not anti-reason, but anti-hubris
- Epistemic self-understanding is the true task